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Many Inventions Behind the Footlights

The Reviewing Stand

By ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT.

WHAT follows here to-day is no final and judgmatical survey of the autumn's most interesting event in the American theater—the appearance of John Barrymore in "Hamlet." Rather it is merely some footnotes to the first review—a glance here and a glance there at the production Mr. Hopkins has made, a random talk on certain aspects of that production as they might come up for argument in any theater party which, having stood by with Fortinbras and watched the limp body of the dead Prince being borne up the castle steps, would repair to the nearest tavern and talk it all over across a round of welsh rabbits. But as one who has now sat twice through the performance, it behooves us to say at once that with Barrymore embodying *Hamlet* we have enjoyed the play as never before, have felt its humanity and its beauty brought to life as never before. It is true that if our theatergoing were not intimately and often embarrassingly involved with the pursuit of our daily bread (gluten) and if only our own enjoyment guided our steps each night among the plays along Broadway we should go each night for the next month to the theater where this revival is being made, fearful only that Barrymore himself would be worn out before we were. This would be our choice in the same sense and for the same reason that, if some one were to give us a box at the Metropolitan for a week and allow us to name the repertoire, the opera each night would be "Boris" with Chaliapin always in the cast.

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It is with a full and vivid memory of the graciousness, the gentle pathos, the wistful beauty of Forbes-Robertson's *Hamlet* that we salute John Barrymore's as the most satisfying performance of the rôle that we have come upon in the theater. We, too, can rail at some of the production's more glaring defects. When in a punditical frame of mind we can chafe at this or that reading and, with the best of them, rise to inquire, for instance, why Barrymore should say "pitch and moment" instead of "pith and moment" in the most celebrated of the soliloquies. We do happen to feel that the dignity and exalting beauty of the investiture wrought by Robert Edmund Jones makes ample amends for whatever inflexibility of the stage is caused by it, but we can throw our own fits over some of the company and, of course, could cast the play much more wisely and more lavishly than Hopkins did. Yet all such complaints must, in the instance of this playgoer, be parenthetical to the outstanding fact—the fact that here for once is a *Hamlet* that comes closest to the one we have imagined all our days, the *Hamlet* whose image has troubled us whenever we have beheld a less satisfying embodiment on the stage. Here, for once in these recent years, is the rôle appropriately cast according to the standards which the living playwrights exact of the producers when their own pieces are taking form in the theater. Call it the quest of types, if you will, but remember that here it is a case of an affinity between part and player that reaches far beneath the surface. From a performance of such rare understanding you do come away with the notion that had Barrymore been a loitering student at Wittenberg to whom *Horatio*, drawing his breath in pain to tell the story, would have brought back the outline of the tragedy, he, far more clearly than *Horatio* himself, far more clearly than all the rest, would have divined what of inner torment and sensitive, bruised distaste had bred the woe at Elsinore.

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Of the several targets which have tempted those minded to take pot-shots at the Hopkins production, the most shining and conspicuous has been his treatment of the *Ghost*—his somewhat cavalier and disdainful treatment of the *Ghost*. Instead of letting him, whom our old friend Dr. Berthold Baer would have referred to unctuously as the demised, promenade before the audience "in his habit as he lived," lo! there appears against the deep blue midnight sky beyond the rampart of the Jones Elsinore a shifting and dissolving cloud of filmy white, in a state of tremulous flux, while from the wings issue the horrendous admonitions to the unhappy Prince. In presenting a corporeal and three dimensioned *Ghost* upon the stage there is, of course, the danger of encountering some of the perils which beset Mr. Wopsle's production of the play, concerning which Mr. Dickens reported thus:

> The late king of the country not only appeared to have been troubled with a cough at the time of his decease, but to have taken it with him to the tomb and to have brought it back. The royal phantom also carried a ghostly manuscript round its truncheon, to which it had the appearance of occasionally referring, and that too with an air of anxiety and a tendency to lose the place of reference which were suggestive of a state of mortality. It was this, I conceive, which led to the Shade's being advised by the gallery to "turn over"—a recommendation which it took extremely ill. It was likewise to be noted of this majestic spirit that whereas it always appeared with the air of having been out a long time and walked an immense distance, it perceptibly came from a closely contiguous wall. This occasioned its terrors to be received derisively.

The gaseous ghost now flickering in Forty-second street has been spoken of hereabouts as a bold innovation. It seems to us rather a bit of bloodless, latter day poltroonery, this evasion by Hopkins of the plain intentions of the author with regard to a rôle which, by the way, Shakespeare himself is said to have acted in the days when "Hamlet," as a new piece, was being deplored by the critics of its own day. One might as well say that because the old lame device of allowing a character to think aloud for the benefit of the audience is likely to tear the veil of illusion in the modern theater, so one should delete all the foolish scenes in which *Hamlet* talks to himself. However, it can hardly be said that the Hopkins notion of giving the ghost so questionable a shape is having a fair trial in the present experiment. Certainly the scene has fallen flat at both performances we have attended, but sundry accidentals have tended to render it ineffectual. It weakens that scene to have the opposing and equally dramatic figure of *Hamlet* utterly swallowed up in the surrounding blackness. It weakens it, too, to have the ghost's speech feebly read. The first night that speech was thick, remote and inaudible. A week later, it emerged crystal clear and neatly clipped in the manner of a lay reader intoning the service.

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Then, too, missiles have been showered around the heads of the cast which Mr. Hopkins has selected for the secondary rôles of the tragedy. That they are secondary, all of them, seems to us inescapable and when they tell us the tale of a "Hamlet" produced in the fond distance at Berlin with a King so richly and superbly played that he quite overshadowed the Prince, the information leaves us with nothing but a sullen suspicion that the Prince on that occasion must have been pretty weakly acted. It is preposterous to suggest that any of the other rôles needs such an actor as *Hamlet* needs, but it would be interesting for once in a way to see "Hamlet" done with a company so happily and so generously chosen that all its values might be brought into play and no part of it forfeited by a pallid performance. It would be absurd to contend that this is happening now under the Hopkins direction. Frankly, the *Ophelia* is pretty bad. The choice of Rosalind Fuller for the part seems to have been dictated by the fact that she weighs much less than 180 pounds, is far less than 54 years old and can sing prettily the snatches of song into which the maddened girl breaks as her last hour approaches. The fact that she had never betrayed in public any ability whatever to act was not allowed to enter in and after all the producer who would choose a woman to play *Ophelia* because she could sing ballads might, unless watched, send over to France and engage the finest fencing-master in Paris to play *Hamlet*. Incidentally, the fencing scene is done with superb pantomime and it is kept graphically dramatic. It was rehearsed by one who had studied the play since his boyhood and who also could teach Barrymore what of dirty fighting and mean footwork must have entered into sword's play at the court of *Claudius*. That scene was rehearsed by Douglas Fairbanks. We should like on some other day to air our notions on the rôle of the Queen, to note how, perhaps, she might be played and how, in particular, she is played with in the present production. But it ought to be said in behalf of all the supporting company now circling in the shadow around Barrymore's *Hamlet* that they are not encouraged by the direction to think of their rôles as deeply important. It must be difficult, for instance, for the *Laertes* and the *Ophelia* to take themselves very seriously when they see each night how the late arrivals are held in leash at the back of the auditorium while *Hamlet* is on the stage, only to be allowed to swarm noisily to their seats the moment he has vanished into the wings. Thus poor *Polonius* must pour out his celebrated paternal advice in competition with a Mrs. Grundy climbing over a row of knees and settling into her seat, full of small talk, eager expectations and dinner.

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As for the contention of those old-timers who, throughout the performance and afterward, tell us how wretchedly inferior this new *Hamlet* is to Booth's, deponent sayeth nothing, not knowing. But it is perhaps worth noting that this or something like it has always been said of the new *Hamlet* as each generation has had the impertinence to attempt the part, and we take considerable comfort on such occasions from rereading that passage in "Nicholas Nickleby" wherein Mr. and Mrs. Curdle touched on the subject. Mr. Curdle, whom some one had once unfortunately spoken of as resembling Sterne, had proved that by altering the received mode of punctuation any one of Shakespeare's plays could be made quite different and the sense completely changed. It is needless to say, therefore, that he was a great critic and a very profound and most original thinker. Thus Dickens.

"What man is there now living who can present before us all those changing and prismatic colors with which the character of *Hamlet* is invested?" exclaimed Mrs. Curdle.

"What man indeed—upon the stage," said Mr. Curdle, with a small reservation in favor of himself. "*Hamlet!* Pooh! Ridiculous! *Hamlet* is gone, perfectly gone."

Which curiously familiar colloquy is here culled from a book written more than eighty years ago.

And after all, wasn't it the Curdles that *Hamlet* had in mind when, in tweaking the greybeard *Polonius*, he says, "When Roscius was in Rome there was an actor . . . "?

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But the most felicitous comment on the new *Hamlet* was made by our eldest daughter, who said: "I heard Heifetz play all afternoon and Barrymore act all evening and so I painted the bathroom until 3 in the morning, because I was too excited to go to sleep."

John Barrymore as *Hamlet*.

The Talk of Broadway

By FRANK VREELAND

THIS seems to be developing into a prosperous season—more roseate than last, it would seem, for the big hits, which hardly need the additional prosperity, however. After hitting the doldrums just before election, it has rebounded almost high enough to meet the characteristic optimism with which the managers looked forward to this winter. The coal strike hasn't hindered the playhouses to the extent of the dark picture drawn in the prognostications of the pessimists in the show business, who declared this autumn that in a month all the houses would be dark, and indicated their firm intention of cutting their throats in case their prophecy came to pass. It appears that many of the managers laid by a good store of coal, thereby emulating the example of canny William A. Brady, who had twenty-five tons stored away in his Playhouse which enabled him to look the whole world, including the Fuel Commissioner, in the eye.

So well have some attractions been doing despite the lull which precedes the Yuletide holidays that some theatrical observers are willing to stake their professional reputations that it will be the biggest season in years. Some will even go higher than their reputations and stake money. Broadway is so well filled with fairly profitable shows that comparatively little is stirring in the movement of shows to and fro—in contrast to last season, when shows were shot in and out so fast that the dramatic reviewers began to wear a driven look. "Rain," "So This is London!" "The Ziegfeld Follies," "Merton of the Movies," "The Fool," "The Last Warning," "The Greenwich Village Follies," "Kiki," "Blossom Time," "Hamlet," "Loyalties" and "The Old Soak" are all first class concussions in the way of business. There are a number of others that are making a comfortable gain of $2,000 or more a week, so that in all the city for the first time has at least two dozen profitable attractions—whether viewed from the angle of the cut rate agency or not.

The most interesting features of this rise in the theatrical temperature, which is probably due to the settling down of business more closely to normalcy, is the fact that plays like "Loyalties," which ordinarily are trademarked "intellectual," have also captured the fancy of the masses, and the fact that musical shows, ordinarily the big hits, are finding leaner pickings than usual. The straight drama stands a much better chance than formerly, while only standard works of art like the two "Follies" seem to be viewed in the musical field with anything but amused tolerance.

Managers, however, are gloomily expecting to drop a wad of money that would otherwise be certain from the New Year's Eve celebration, since that event comes through on Sunday this year.

The Theatre Guild is rushing work for the speedy production of "The Tidings Brought to Mary," a medieval, mystic play from the French of Paul Claudel, which was produced in Paris a year ago, being staged in the new manner and therefore eligible as a Guild production. It was written some time before this and was presented in London by the Stage Society about five years ago, despite the competition of the war. The Guild is hastening it because its wishes to produce it between "The Lucky One" and the advent of "Peer Gynt," which will bring Joseph Schildkraut once more within reach.

Schildkraut won't be available till after Christmas, so it is likely "Peer Gynt" won't amble across the stage till February. Helen Westley and Ernita Lascelles have already been engaged for the cast of the Claudel play, showing the Guild means business. Since it is a Christmas legend, the Guild hopes to have the first dress rehearsal ready for Sunday, December 24, and the public opening on Christmas night. To that end, rehearsals will leap into being this week.

Speaking of the tank town offerings, Ethel Shutta of "The Passing Show of 1922," at the Winter Garden has just disinterred a seventeen-year-old letter head of A. H. Woods which flaunted the productions he sponsored before he rose to the heights of the bedroom drama. Miss Shutta was then a child prodigy playing a boy in one of the Woods productions, and got the letter when her mother sent notice and Woods indicated in reply that the show would virtually fall apart if little Miss Shutta left. The shows were proudly announced as "encircling the globe." Here they go:

"Queen of the White Slaves," "Confessions of a Wife," "Fallen by the Wayside," "For Old Time's Sake," "Fast Life in New York," "Dangers of Working Girls," "Tracked Around the World," "Lights and Shadows of New York," "Queen of the High Binders," "The Crooked Path," "Lured From Home," "Sins of Her Childhood," "Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl," and "The Belle of Avenue A," starring Elfie Fay.

Some of the tank town plays were mentioned here last week. Others which have been found prowling around in our own dear State are "The Unmarried Mother," "The Unborn Child," "The Sins of Hollywood" and "One Girl's Experience." The program for one presentation of "Why Wives Go Wrong," which includes "several surprising solutions by Arthur Teenon Kayser," may be of interest, as per the following sample:

Morgan Carr, a satisfied man of the world.....Mr. Richard Earle
Aggie Sheridan, a wife with worries.....Miss Hilda Graham
Margie Patch, a wife with a solution all her own..Miss Virginia Stuart
The Stranger.....F. L. Maddock
Jack Sheridan, a husband with suspicions....Mr. Alexander Campbell
Jim Fisher, the station agent....
Mr. George D. Chase
Bill Patch, married and satisfied..
Mr. Arnold Monroe

It was said around the Woods office a few days ago that plans had been very definitely set for the presentation of Marjorie Rambeau in "As You Like It," and she would commence working her charm as *Rosalind* in January. Woods will not be actively interested in the production, but it will be made through the efforts of Augustus Thomas, who spoke of the project last week in his article on a national theater in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Ian Keith has been assigned to cover the part of *Orlando*. Plans for this production had been started as early this season as September, when the manager wrote a letter to his star granting permission for her to fulfill her ambition of taking Shakespeare under her wing.

While waiting for this event Ian Keith will march upon the provinces in support of Helen MacKellar in "The Masked Woman," which will plunge into the hinterland of Wilkes-Barre on Dec. 25. Incidentally since there has been some question as to whose adaptation of Charles Mare's play was being used, it is here stated authoritatively that it is Kate Jordan's—though probably few outside the inner circles of the theater care a particular hoot.

"The Gringo," Sophie Treadwell's drama of Mexico, comes to the Comedy Theater on December 12, which means that "The Romantic Age" is not long for this life. Jose Ruben wanted to play the role of the chief Mexican in it with high topped boots, but when it was pointed out to him that these were the comic opera variety he consented to have his legs sheathed in the regular Mexican type, a real pair that doubtless some Mexican died in. Their dirt was compensated by the silver buttons on his pea jacket.

One of Owen Davis's plays was as eagerly sought last week end as if it were something useful, like a ton of coal. It was his latest fabrication, called "Ice Bound," and he turned it over to three producers—Sam H. Harris, the Selwyns and Brock Pemberton—with the suggestion that it might make the week end less of a bore. All three of them read it—yes, it's been known to happen in some managerial circles—and all three of them accepted it, in the back of their heads. But when they returned to town on Monday Pemberton and the Selwyns found that Harris had been the first on the spot with a loaded check. He won it.

Pemberton, by the way, aims to do the musical version of "Good Gracious, Annabelle," soon, if he can find a playhouse yawning for it and if no more than three other managers lay claim to it.

Leo Ditrichstein, now in Detroit, is expected to force his way into some theatrical stronghold here in a few weeks in "Under False Pretenses."

Out of the remains of the Kousnezoff "Revue Russe" company which will never more be seen together in this country, one performer at least has been salvaged. She is the petite dancer, Mlle. Tanina, and she will

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Barrymore as *Hamlet*.

Violet Heming in "The Lucky One" at the Garrick.

LETTERS INSPIRED BY 'THE FOOL'

By CHANNING POLLOCK.

THE most curious of the many curious things about "The Fool" is the way it sets people writing letters.

When the play was produced on the coast they began coming in at the rate of forty or fifty a day. By the time it had been running three weeks in Los Angeles the average had increased to more than a hundred. Two weeks after my return to New York and soon after Richard Bennett took the piece to San Francisco I had on my desk nearly a thousand communications bearing the postmark of one of the two cities. The letters were of all sorts and from all kinds of people—letters praising the play, letters condemning it, letters making suggestions, expressing thanks for personal help, asking the elucidation of points not clearly understood, insisting that one scene or another be made the mouthpiece of one cult or another. "To decide a bet, will you let us know what you intended by the symbolic lines at the end of the last act?" "Please tell me whether you really hold the view of divorce expressed by Gilchrist?" Mostly and above all, "Have you tried the experiment of living the life you have imposed upon your hero?" I don't know why the general insistence that Gilchrist's ideal must be mine, and that, for some reason or other, "The Fool" must be closely connected with my own character and experience. When "The Crowded Hour" was produced no one asked me if I had been in France with a regiment of Engineers, and it didn't occur to anybody that I must have started life as a cattle man in order to have fashioned "The Sign on the Door."

Naturally a man must believe in the theme of his play—at least, as an interesting working proposition—or he couldn't write it. I do believe in Gilchrist's experiment—in the possibility of living in literal observance of the laws of Christ—and that this experiment has given complete peace and happiness to thousands of people and may to thousands more. I believe that every single person in the world, and the world itself, will achieve peace and happiness in the measure of his or her or its approach to the mental and spiritual plane, and the abandonment of the wholly material. But I am not in the least a Christlike person. I wish I were. I have found happiness of simple living and I have learned that a little house and a few books and an interest in people are enough to fill anybody's life. I have learned that hate is a futile and poisonous thing, and that thinking of the other fellow first is good business as well as good conduct, but I have not sold all I possessed and given it to the poor, and—though I wish I might—I don't often bless them that curse me.

By the time we had begun rehearsals of "The Fool" for New York the flood of letters became an almost negligible trickle. After the opening here there were some scores of pleasantly commending epistles from people whose good opinion I value above all things—from Augustus Thomas and Hartley Manners and Jesse Lynch Williams and George Middleton; from Nicholas Murray Butler and Charles Dana Gibson and John Haynes Holmes; from professors and clergymen and bankers and doctors and lawyers and actors. Within a week we were hearing also from the butcher, and baker and candlestick maker, and I was glad, of course, and engaged an additional typist to help my secretary. There were letters, too, from the heads of settlement houses, from charitable organizations, from religious bodies, from labor unions. The clergyman of a big church wanted to buy a performance and send his congregation. A bank president felt that his employees would be strengthened in their honesty by seeing "The Fool," and wrote me that he had purchased fifty seats for them. All this was extraordinary and interesting and highly satisfactory, proof that the play was doing what I wanted to do in a wider measure than I had ever thought possible. Naturally, it made me happy.

By the end of our third week my mail had increased to an average of 600 letters a day. Some days there were over 700. The flood has never fallen below 200. Two boys sorted my letters from those of other people in the Selwyn offices and theaters and brought them to us in a big wooden box. We had no equipment, no system, no office force to cope with the situation. I felt strongly that every letter should be acknowledged, that scores should be answered, but that soon became impossible. In the beginning I had asked for an unused and vacant room in the Selwyn Theater Building, in which I had installed two typewriters and two typists. There was no room for more, and no other place to put them. We continue to struggle in this tiny place, the furniture of which, besides the typewriters, includes only a bench with a broken arm and a kitchen table. From that office we are trying to catch up on back mail and to reply to a steadily continuing inundation. Of course it is quite hopeless and in this morning's newspapers I have inserted an acknowledgment that I hope will be accepted by the friends and well wishers who have written only to say that they liked the performance. The other letters we are still trying to answer. In all since the night of our opening in New York we have had nearly 6,000.

As I have said, these are of all kinds. They include scores of invitations to speak and I accept as many of these as I can, because I have many things to say about the play and the theater at large and I want to say them as often as possible. There are suggestions that Mr. Kirkwood, who plays *Gilchrist*, or I read the lessons in church, or speak from the pulpit, or in synagogues, and we are both glad to feel that in a theater that had come to the abasement of a suggested censorship there had been produced a play that has made possible

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